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A PORTRAIT OF IRVIN S. COBB*

Anita S. Lawson, Ph.D.



OLD IRV COBB

It is a pleasure to be with you tonight to celebrate the return of Irvin Cobb's papers to Kentucky. Pulling this collection—these particular manuscripts and letters—out of the trunk where they had been stored since Cobb's death was one of the highlights of my research on Irvin Cobb in the late seventies. I am pleased that the same spirit of generosity that allowed me access to them at that time has led to their donation to the Pogue Library. It also pleases me to think that, now that they are a part of the Pogue's resources, they may prove as valuable to a future researcher as they were to me.

For my brief remarks to you this evening, I have set as my aim to give you, not a chronological narrative of Irvin Cobb's life, but a portrait, a sense of this very talented and very complex man to carry away with you. I knew that Dr. Heim would have the portraits of Cobb, his daughter, and his grandfather on display, so I knew you would have a physical image to remember. I want you to get to know the man behind this highly original face. Let me then talk of Irvin Cobb under several headings, Cobb as Kentuckian, as Newspaperman, as Fiction Writer, as Humorist, as Friend, and as National Institution.

First of all, Cobb was a Kentuckian. In his case, this means much more than the simple fact that he was born in Paducah in 1876 and grew up there. Even though the last forty years of his life were spent in New York and then California, all through his life Cobb felt himself to be a Kentuckian first. He wrote about Kentucky places and people, bragged about Kentucky, and poked fun at himself as a Kentuckian. During the first half of this century only Vice President Alben Barkley was as celebrated for being from Kentucky as Cobb.

Cobb returned to Kentucky often, maintaining friendships, taking part in celebrations, and offering advice when he thought it was needed. The most vivid

*These remarks were delivered at the dedication of the Cobb Collection in the Pogue Library, Murray State University, 23 April 1993.

example of this came in 1922, when he became alarmed at the growing strength of the Ku Klux Klan in this part of the country. At the invitation of a friend, the Editor of the Paducah *News-Democrat*, he came home as guest editor of the newspaper for one day, taking advantage of the opportunity both to joke about old friends and wax nostalgic about old times in print—and to write a stirring lead editorial denouncing the Klan as the "Masked Brotherhood of Bigotry, Bravado, Bluster, and Bunk" that had no place in Paducah.

In 1928, alarmed at the anti-Catholic sentiments he saw in Kentucky, he campaigned in the state for the unsuccessful presidential bid of his good friend Al Smith. Cobb had at least the satisfaction that Paducah went for Smith by a small margin; as Cobb said, it "did have rather a close call from going Baptist."

Secondly, Cobb was a Newspaperman. He became a reporter at age 16, when he had to quit school to support his mother, sisters, and younger brother, and he considered himself a newspaperman until his death. He covered stories of all kinds and served in several editorial assignments, but his fame as a reporter was based on his coverage of trials and of the First World War.

As a reporter for the Louisville *Evening Post* right after the turn of the century, he covered the trials of the Kentucky Republicans accused of assassinating Governor William Goebel, a Democrat who may or may not have won the election and who lived only four days after he was sworn in. As a reporter for the New York *Evening World* in 1907-8, he was hailed for his stories on the trial of the accused murderer of architect Stanford White.

Cobb's triumph as a reporter, however, and the series that brought him the widest national fame, was his coverage of World War I for the *Saturday Evening Post*. He made two trips to Europe for the *Post*, one before the American entry into the war and one after, and his weekly reports provided Americans with the best information available to them about what was going on. His eye-witness descriptions of the German army's destruction of Belgium, and his account of the harrowing experiences that followed his capture behind the German lines—an episode that could have resulted in his being hanged or shot—were read and talked about by the entire country.

Through these dispatches, Cobb found a special audience that remained loyal for the rest of his career: the parents and friends of soldiers in the all-black American regiments. Cobb was the only American reporter to send back stories about the black soldiers that maintained their dignity and reported on their contributions to the effort; his *Post* stories were reprinted in black newspapers coast to coast.

Cobb was greatly surprised, upon his return, to find himself a hero of black Americans. He was given an honored position in two celebrations of the efforts of the black soldiers. In January 1919, Theodore Roosevelt and Cobb were the featured speakers in a program in Carnegie Hall in New York, where Cobb told the largely black audience: "The color of a man's skin hasn't anything to do with the color of his soul." The second celebration took place in Paducah, where the local black community organized a day of festivities to honor this native son of whom they were so proud.

As Fiction Writer, Cobb was inspired by the example of Mark Twain, another newspaperman who became widely admired for his stories and novels, but Cobb's early fiction—his best—experimented with many different approaches to the genre. He explored the psychology of evil and the role of circumstances in

motivation and action. In presenting actions that violate social mores, he sought to explore and present the pressures and constraints that lead his characters to behave the way they do.

Cobb's best known—and some of his best—fiction is the stories he wrote in the teens and twenties about Paducah in the 1880s. They often feature Judge Priest, a local figure who strives, story by story, to establish peace, justice, and human dignity in a brawling river town populated by small-town businessmen, gamblers, thieves, prostitutes, preachers, and poor laborers, black and white. Cobb set forth his aim in the Judge Priest stories to present an image of the small-town South as it really was to a country who thought of the South in terms of plantation owners and mountaineers. His success at that time is indicated by one of the most interesting contemporary assessments I ran across, made in 1914 by a very young Sinclair Lewis:

Irvin Cobb has made Paducah and all the other Paducahs—in Kentucky and Minnesota and California and Vermont—from which the rest of us came, live for us, in fiction which gets us as no foreign tale ever can. He makes one smell the soil.

In the twenties, however, literary tastes changed, and the task Cobb had set for himself, demonstrating human worth and the possibility of goodness in a gravely flawed world, was subsumed by a new literary aim pioneered by Lewis, Theodore Dreiser, and others, to show the flaws beneath the surface of a world popularly assumed to be ideal.

After Cobb's fictions was unfairly attacked in the twenties by H.L. Mencken and others for sentimentality and promotion of bogus Southern ideals, he lost his faith in himself and ceased to experiment. Instead, he wrote stores that pleased the *Post* readership and which, over time, degenerated in their literary value.

It is my conviction that, had Cobb had a conscientious editor able to give him the kind of constructive advice and moral support received by Thomas Wolfe, to give one example, he might be known today as one of the important fiction writers of the early twentieth century. He still deserves a footnote in literary history for the quality of his early stories.

It is as Humorist that Cobb will remain more than a footnote. Cobb was a naturally funny man, who throughout his life took upon himself the duty to entertain those around him. In his newspaper days, while covering trials and wars, he also wrote humor columns as regular features of the newspapers that employed him. One of the real finds, for me, in the collection that has now come to Murray State is a treasure trove of clippings from humorous series that ran in the *New York World* in the teens. These are often half-page or larger in their format, with copious illustrations and a running story that might be better compared to a situation comedy on television than anything in newspapers today. "The Hotel Clerk," series, for example, featured the employees and regulars of the Hotel St. Reckless, who interact with each other as they comment on current events.

Recent studies of American humor have given Cobb a major role in the development of a kind of humor that became a standard in this century. Literary historian Norris Yates labels this the humor of the "Little Man," characterized by its viewpoint of the hapless citizen trying with difficulty to maintain his dignity

in the complex, impersonal world of the twentieth century. Yates cites an early Irvin Cobb work; "Speaking of Operations" sold over a hundred thousand copies its first year and, the last time I checked, was still in print.

After Cobb's pioneer efforts in this type of humor, he was joined by Robert Benchley and James Thurber, and in the teens and twenties the three of them produced a body of work so pervasive in its transformation of American humor that it's hard for us to understand that someone, Irvin Cobb, invented it. To cite just one example, if you look up that fundamental twentieth century image, "living in a goldfish bowl," in *Bartlett's Familiar Quotations*, the reference cited will be Cobb's *Speaking of Operations*.

As writer, as public speaker, and as conversationalist, Irvin Cobb was one of the most influential humorists this country has ever produced. Half of his approximately 50 book-length works are humor.

As Friend, Irvin Cobb was also unique in his talent for friendships with men both celebrated and obscure. He was a devoted son, husband, and father to his daughter Buff, whom he adored, but he was most at ease and most expansive in an all-male setting: the newsroom, the ball-park, the fishing camp, the male club. The journalist and editor Bob Davis, explained his qualities this way:

Unlike most men who have risen from obscurity to a position of high eminence, he still holds all his old friends. He is a kind of fat Pollyanna. . . [who] wants to split all his happiness fifty-fifty. And he is a great listener to boot.

A broad spectrum of celebrities from Broadway, New York journalism, Hollywood, and national politics called him friend. Besides Davis, the friends Cobb cherished the most included Texas businessman Will Hogg, Western artist Charles Russell, and humorist Will Rogers. Rogers was responsible for Cobb's career in the thirties as Hollywood writer and actor, a chapter of his life I am neglecting in these remarks.

Instead, let me conclude by touching briefly on Cobb as National Institution. I take the phrase from a prominent magazine which honored Cobb's fortieth birthday with a feature item that labeled Cobb that way and went on to state:

One of America's chief assets is Irvin S. Cobb. More people read him than any other contemporary writer, to be both amused and informed. . . . He skimmed the cream off the European War in the first three months and has made nearly everything that has been written since seem dull and trite; and he lectures on the war as vividly and picturesquely as he writes.

Being a national institution to whom America went to be informed as well as amused was very important to Cobb. When he lost that authority in the thirties and forties, when he was relegated to the stock role of funny Southerner, his self-image suffered. He continued to entertain his friends and worked hard to please the audience that remained loyal, but the diminution of his national image was a tremendous blow to his self-esteem and his dignity.

He was gratified by the reception of his 1941 biography *Exit Laughing*, which restored some of his earlier stature. And he would very much have enjoyed the national reaction to the widely publicized letter he left to be opened after his

death, a letter which gave instructions for an unconventional funeral in Paducah and took on organized religion in the process. Cobb, in his last public act, ensured that the world that turned to him for amusement be forced once again to confront his serious opinions.

Following his instructions, in 1944 Cobb was buried in Paducah while a black choir sang spirituals. Later a granite boulder was erected over his grave that says, simply, "Back Home." I am sure that he would be pleased to know that, fifty years later, the papers that were in his possession at his death have also come "back home" to Kentucky.

